**TOWARDS AN EU STRATEGY FOR INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL RELATIONS**

**European Parliament Resolution of 5 July 2017 (2016/2240 (INI))**

**A Critique from an African perspective**

**Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of your meeting today, and for accommodating my participation by way of technology. I’m talking to you in my capacity as part of the leadership of the African Cultural Policy Network, and the nascent Global South Arts and Culture Initiative. It is against this background that my provocation today will focus on the European Parliament’s resolution on culture as part of the EU’s strategy for international cultural relations, adopted in July 2017.

Every country, region or political bloc has the right to formulate cultural policies and strategies that serve their strategic interests in the economic, political, cultural or geo-security spheres.

The European Union is one of the most significant political, economic and cultural blocs globally, and its influence is experienced in multiple ways, through trade, military assistance, development aid, cultural partnerships e.g. through EUNIC agencies, as well as through projecting its interests, perspectives and values via a range of global media platforms.

Thus, when the European Union formulates and implements a resolution that focuses on culture in international relations, it is not simply a resolution that has to do with promoting harmonious people-to-people relations across various divides; it is fundamentally about culture serving the soft power interests of the European bloc, as the Resolution itself declares.

Countries and regions outside of Europe do not co-formulate cultural policies with Europe, but they do experience the ramifications of such policies, with many countries in the Global South embracing these policies as they come with resources, or because such countries rarely have the capacity to interrogate such policies at government level.

**The European Union versus the African Union**

European cultural policies and strategies are far more likely to influence cultural and artistic practice on the African continent than African regional cultural policies and initiatives.

For example, although not a specifically European policy, 44 African countries have ratified the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, 80% of the total number of countries on the continent. Twenty-four of these had ratified the Convention by the end of 2008, three years after the approval of the text at UNESCO’s General Assembly in 2005.

By contrast, the African Union adopted its own Charter for African Cultural Renaissance in January 2006; the Charter would come into force once it was ratified by two-thirds of the 55 African countries. As of this year – 2019 – only 13 countries have ratified the Charter, so that it has now been decided that it will come into effect once it has reached a threshold of a mere 15 ratifications.

This critique of the Resolution will pick up on some of its key themes*.*

**Culture and Development**

Objective 4 of the Resolution *calls for cultural rights to be promoted as integral to fundamental rights, and for culture to be considered for its intrinsic value as a fourth standalone, transversal pillar of sustainable development together with social, economic and environmental dimensions*

Development is not a neutral activity. It is, in fact, an act of culture. Whatever interests it serves and however it is defined, development is premsied on values, worldviews, ideas and ideological assumptions, with the development process acting on the values, beliefs and meaning-making of the intended beneficiaries of development.

In 2009, the European Commission co-hosted with the ACP Secretariat a colloquium in Brussels on the theme “Culture as a Vector of Development”; at that time too, culture was regarded as one of the four pillars of Europe’s development policies. Soon after that Colloquium however, culture was abandoned by the EU, yet here we are ten years later, encountering a similar moment with the EU having just hosted a colloquium for creative professionals on the theme “Culture for the Future”. There is a new EU parliament in place with new commissioners about to be appointed, so that there is no guarantee that culture will continue to be part of the EU’s development or international agenda.

Such real and possible changes point to the vulnerability of culture in development and international relations given the shifts in political, economic, domestic, geo-strategic interests of donor or partner blocs such as the EU.

As we all know, the classic definition of sustainable development is “meeting the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” which underscores the relevance of the environmental, social and economic pillars of development. However, the importance of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development has less to do with this definition than with the understanding that for development to be sustainable, it has to take cognisance of, and be rooted in the value and belief systems, the traditions, the identity and meaning making – in short, the culture - of the intended beneficiaries.

For example, one of the SDGs goal is gender equity and the empowerment of women and girls through education. However, in many societies, patriarchy – underpinned by religious and other social values – assign women and girls to a lesser status than men, so that development in this instance, needs to take this into account when formulating strategies that address fundamental cultural questions that militate against the realisation of the proposed development goals.

The Resolution is rather weak on defining and asserting – practically – the cultural dimension of the EU’s development agenda.

**Creative and Cultural Industries**

Objective 15 of the Resolution *welcomes…the cultural and creative industries as an important element of the EU’s strategy for international cultural relations; (with) these industries contribut(ing) to Europe’s ‘soft power’ in their role as ambassadors of European values…*

In recent times, the creative and cultural industries have largely been regarded as the “cultural dimension of development”, that by contributing to job creation and economic growth, they would generate resources needed for human and social development.

However, there are at least four primary reasons why the contribution of the CCIs to human, social and economic development is a fallacious argument, at least in the African context.

First, most African countries have not had a problem with economic growth over the last 15-20 years. This, however, has not translated into human and social development; rather, inequality has deepened and the numbers of people who live below the poverty line in Sub-Saharan Africa have increased in the last two decades. There is no real correlation between economic growth and human and social development in the African experience.

Second, most Africans make their livings in the agricultural sector and/or the informal economy. The potential for the CCIs to have some kind of economic impact is related to the formal economy with features such as effectively policed copyright regimes, successful tax systems and the capacity to monitor income streams and jobs per sector; few of which exist in most African countries.

Third, as with its rich mineral resources, Africa is not short on the raw material of the CCIs – talent! And yet, as with mineral resources, there are huge deficiencies (infrastructure, human resources, access to capital, etc) at all levels of the value chain in every discipline – education, creation, production, distribution, consumption and documentation.

Finally, South Africa, with probably the most diversified economy on the African continent, has concentrated on the creative and cultural industries since it adopted the Cultural Industries Growth Strategy in 1998. However, notwithstanding relatively strong CCIs (compared to other African countries), inequality (the top 10% earn 60% of national income), poverty (55% of the population) and unemployment (26%) have all worsened in the last two decades. It is inappropriate to burden the arts and culture sector with expectations to address major development challenges that more productive sectors of the economy have been unable to meet.

Moreover, a cultural and creative industries approach to development with such industries requiring significant markets to sustain themselves and grow, would exclude most Africans from exercising their cultural rights to participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts, as they simply do not possess the disposable income to be such markets.

**Intercultural dialogue and EU values**

Objective 41 *emphasises the need to redefine the important role of national cultural institutes in intercultural exchanges, bearing in mind that some of these have long traditions with many contacts in third countries, allowing them to serve as a solid foundation for cooperation and communication among the various European players; points, furthermore, to their potential to promote and facilitate bilateral relationships between countries and to help develop and implement a European strategy for cultural diplomacy*

The Resolution highlights the importance of culture as a means of soft power and as an instrument of projecting European values globally, not least through EUNIC agencies. Two of the key faultlines in the world today are inequality and culture; inequality in political, economic, military and cultural power and culture with regard to the differences in values, belief systems and identity-making.

Cultural diplomacy and intercultural dialogue are soft power strategies that serve particular economic, political, security and related interests that cannot be divorced from the overall structural inequalities that prevail. The Resolution barely addresses social, political and economic injustices so that the deployment of culture to address symptoms of such inequalities, is weak and unsustainable.

**Destruction of cultural heritage**

The Resolution applauds the *decision of the International Criminal Court of 27 September 2016 in which Ahmad Al Faqi Mahdi was found guilty of the destruction of several mausoleums in Timbuktu and in which it ruled for the first time, in accordance with the Rome Statute, that the destruction of cultural heritage may be regarded as a war crime*

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court was adopted in 1998. As such, it could only be applied to crimes that fell under its jurisdiction from that point forward or European countries, their leaders and army personnel would have been found guilty for similar destruction and looting of cultural heritage during the colonial period. Furthermore, there is a perception of hypocrisy in the application of such protection e.g. where the cultural heritage reflects the personages of those that may have been in conflict with Europe e.g. Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein, then it would appear to be acceptable that such heritage is destroyed, lest it provoke or invoke renewed support for the ideas of such personages.

Europe’s lack of condemnation of Israel’s destruction of cultural institutions in Palestine e.g. the bombing of the al-Meshal Foundation’s cultural centre in Gaza in August 2018, renders the Resolution suspect in its biases, and affirms culture as an extension of Europe’s policies with regard to international relations.

**Addressing conflict**

The Resolution frequently mentions the role of culture as an instrument of soft power, as a means of dialogue, as a platform for projecting European values, as a front in the “war on terror”, and a tool against radicalisation and terrorism.

The Resolution does not attempt to address the causes of radicalisation – the social, economic, political and cultural inequities and the alienation that these lead to, neither does the Resolution appear to address nationalistic radicalisation and terrorism which has led to an increase in hate crimes committed by white people on people of colour within Europe over the last while.

**Human Rights**

Objective 6 *calls for artistic freedom of expression to be promoted as a value and an endeavour of the European Union, fostering free dialogue and the exchange of good practices at international level,* with Objective 71 underlining the EU’s foundations based on  *the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights…*

While the Universal Declaration for Human Rights states that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”, most people in the Global South know that they do not enjoy the same rights and that they will not be treated with the same dignity as their European counterparts. Europeans may travel globally to more than 150 countries without visas and sell their labour relatively freely, whereas workers from the Global South and Africa in particular, find it nearly impossible to travel and work abroad, even though remittances to Africa account for a significant part of Africa’s GDP, and even though many wealthy countries grew their economies by forcibly kidnapping and removing Africans from their continent to work as cheap, slave labour.

While this applies to the minority who are able to travel, it is nevertheless instructive that people of colour are treated as less than human, certainly less than equal to their white counterparts at points of entry into Europe, almost always suspected to be potential economic refugees at best, simply because of the colour of their skin and their continent of origin. I know this from direct and persistent personal experience.

Europe promotes individual human rights, but all Africans are treated as a group, as if they are the same, with no distinction made on the basis of education, gender, skills, social status, etc. It would be unacceptable to distinguish between people on the basis of these characteristics in determining mobility, but the point being made is that none of these factors matter more than the “race” and continent of origin of Africans when it comes to treating them with dignity and respect as human beings who enjoy the same rights as white folk.

The emphasis on particular rights e.g. freedom of expression in repressive societies in particular is welcome, but it is hypocritical given the difficulties that writers, artists, musicians and other intellectuals face in obtaining visas to enter Europe, and to exercise their rights to freedom of association and freedom of expression in fortress Europe.

There is little value in promoting culture as a means of anti-radicalisation or as a means of intercultural dialogue when European repression of human rights and undermining of dignity contribute to radicalism.

**Conclusion**

There are many good recommendations in the Resolution on Culture in International Relations, - the emphasis on youth, support for civil society, the call for greater mobility, etc - but the overarching framework is about Europe’s political, economic, security and geo-strategic interests, its values and its cultural hegemony, EUNIC institutions being instruments of its soft power globally.

Global South actors generally and African actors in particular will engage with Europe and its agencies broadly in one of four ways:

1. by buying into and supporting the European agenda completely, actively supporting it because of the benefits derived from such support
2. complete rejection of the European agenda and anything to do with it as agencies of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism
3. pragmatic engagement with muted criticism so as not to compromise much-needed support and
4. robust engagement with the EU and its agencies in search of real partnerships based on a degree of integrity

Cultural cooperation and collaboration take place in structurally unequal contexts, in a world where the cultural hegemony of the economically and politically powerful is already assured.

The structural inequalities are, however, unsustainable and as long as these are not addressed, there will be increased conflicts and tensions, greater waves of migration and refugees, more radicalisation and attacks on Global North interests, so that culture as a mitigating strategy will be relatively meaningless, particularly when the so-called progressive values of Europe are contradicted by the actual experience of Global South citizens.

Rather than creating and projecting policies that narrowly assert its own interests, Europe and its agencies such as EUNIC would do better to engage with its partners and even its detractors outside of the European bubble, to co-create a more equitable, more just world that better serves the interests of the majority who live in it.